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ABSTRACT

This report identifies data elements and dissemination needs of District of Columbia (DC) educators, citizens, and public servants regarding elementary, secondary, higher, and adult education, presenting findings on the availability, dissemination, and evaluation of data systems in state and local school districts considered to have effective information systems. In spring 2002, surveys circulated at community group meetings and e-mailed to DC organizations and individuals concerned with public education examined data elements respondents would most likely access in an ample data system (K-12 information for charter, traditional public, and private schools; adult education information; and higher education information). In summer 2002, a search of state and local Web sites and follow-up telephone interviews with state and local education sites indicated that: most sites were moving toward single-record systems to track individual students and teachers over time and combine multiple data sources; all sites disseminated school report cards; all sites had comprehensive Web sites; and most sites relied on software systems and internal staff to ensure high-quality data. In fall 2002, nine focus groups with students, parents, teachers, and policymakers examined what information participants needed about education, how they wanted to get that information, and barriers to getting education information. Results deepened the understanding of survey data. A consistent finding across jurisdictions was the political impact of data collection and reporting. (SM)

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District Community Voices
DC VOICE
Organized and Informed for Change in Education

The Demand for Information for Educational Decision Making in the District of Columbia: A Public Discourse

Special Report to the District of Columbia State Education Office

UD 035 904

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The Demand for Information for Educational Decision Making in the District of Columbia: A Public Discourse

DC VOICE SPECIAL REPORT TO THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA STATE EDUCATION OFFICE (SEO)

March 2003

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than a decade, numerous reports have called attention to serious and persistent problems with the availability, reliability, and credibility of information about elementary and secondary education in the District of Columbia. ("District of Columbia" is abbreviated as "D.C.," "the District," and "Washington" throughout this report.) Research indicates that many states suffer from similar systemic human resource and technical difficulties facing the District of Columbia.

The D.C. State Education Office (SEO) has asked for information on how states handle these challenges, and it has called for input by the public about what would be considered reliable information for all stakeholder groups in the community—students, parents, educators, policy makers, and researchers alike—so they each can make sound judgments about the quality of local education.

This report was prepared by members of the DC VOICE education reform collaborative, the Public Education Research Consortium, and The George Washington University. It is designed to assist efforts by the D.C. State Education Office (SEO) to develop a comprehensive, useful, high-quality public information system that coordinates information on the traditional public school system, charter schools, and institutions of higher education in the District of Columbia. The purpose of this report is twofold:

- To identify and report on the data elements and dissemination needs of D.C. educators, citizens, and public servants regarding issues of elementary, secondary, adult, and higher education in the District
- To report findings concerning the availability, dissemination, and evaluation of data systems in state and local school districts considered to have very good information systems

In Spring 2002, a questionnaire was circulated at community group meetings and e-mailed to organizations and individuals in the District who are concerned with public school education. One hundred fifty-five respondents answered, including parents, teachers, principals, D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) and charter school administrators, community activists, and members of the nonprofit, for-profit, and research communities. The majority of respondents were those with access and skill on the Internet. Only 12% were parents and 14% teachers.

The results indicate the data elements that survey respondents would most like access to in an ample data system:

- Elementary and secondary school information for charter, traditional public, and private schools
- Adult education information, particularly on GED and English language programs
- Higher education information, especially certificate programs and information on the Tuition Assistance Grant

In addition, survey respondents listed periodic reports they would like produced by the State Education Office:

- The overwhelming response to this request concerns the development of school report cards, which would include information on standardized achievement tests and other measures of student outcomes, student and school characteristics for each school, and comparisons with other schools or district totals.
- The second most requested type of reporting concerns teacher-quality issues, such as certification and qualification information.
- Other reports requested include a financial report that includes district- and school-level information, an annual review of the SEO to determine how the office is meeting its goals, an annual enrollment report, an annual report of school-level program information, and an annual report on the status of special education in the District.

During Summer 2002, a search of state and local websites was carried out, and follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with eight state and local education sites, yielding details about exemplar electronic education information systems around the country. Interviews and web reviews produced these findings:

- Most sites are moving toward a single-record system that tracks individual students and teachers over time and combines multiple sources of information into one system or data warehouse.
- All sites disseminate school report cards, as well as school- and district-level information.
- All sites have comprehensive websites that disseminate information and data, using multiple formats.
- Most sites rely on software systems and internal staff to ensure high-quality data.
- A few sites provide for public input in the development of data systems and dissemination methods.

During Fall 202, nine community based focus groups (involving students, parents, teachers, and policy makers) discussed these three questions:

- What information do you need about education?
- How do you want to get education information?
- What obstacles are there to getting education information?

Focus group discussions deepened the understanding of survey results and contributed viewpoints not revealed by the survey, including more details on elements for data collection, a range of ways for schools to disseminate information, and perceived obstacles to that dissemination.

Researchers found that a digital divide across the city is a strong reason why a range of constituencies—students, parents, teachers, and policy makers from a variety of institutions—should each take part in any further discussions to plan a better education information system.

With the great digital divide, especially among parents, education information must be presented in a range of ways in the District of Columbia. In addition to catchy and comprehensive websites and timely, resonant audiovisual media, these avenues must include person-to-person approaches and communication that is culturally sensitive as the number of English-only students decreases citywide. Meanwhile, the entire community faces the challenge of training more youths, parents, and teachers to use computers so that a culture of data use permeates all parts of Washington, DC.

With cooperation, patience, and human and financial resources, the District of Columbia can become an exemplary site for education information. Evidence shows that the success of this task will depend on the leadership of high-ranking officials, both inside and outside of education institutions, to provide a far-reaching vision to connect data collection to the larger goals of local education and the District of Columbia government. Because this vision cannot be fully actualized without broad public understanding and support, partnerships among government officials, for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and the public are necessary to gather enough political will to compel positive change.

Creating the best information system possible for all public school children poses big challenges. In the District of Columbia, there is no unanimity on whether to centralize information gathering and dissemination though this research found that exemplary sites have achieved more centralization. Moreover, tension persists on what aggregate and disaggregated data should be presented, especially to parents and the broad community. Research indicates that the conditions of the information systems in Washington, DC and the number of skilled persons handling them are not adequate. A new comprehensive effective

system is needed.

The SEO should lead the effort to develop a long range plan for a citywide coordinated data system for all school children, including the specifics of data warehousing in the District of Columbia. In putting the plan together, an expanded coordinated dialogue is essential among the District Council, the Mayor, the Washington Teachers' Union, Board of Education, DCPS, charter schools and authorities, religious-based and private schools, local universities, non profit organizations, business leaders, and philanthropic institutions.

Meanwhile, short-term steps should include expansion of the use of the DCPS website, translating information for non-English speaking families and families with low literacy in all schools, presenting information in multiple formats for policy-makers, teachers, administrators, and parents, conducting a mapping of education information among all schools—DCPS, charter schools, religious-based schools and private schools—and building our city-wide capacity and readiness for data-reporting software that provides uniform data among all schools.

This report culminates important first steps to build the kind of public information necessary for every child in every classroom in every school to get the quality teaching they deserve. For further information, contact Tahi Mottl Reynolds, Ph.D., DC VOICE, 202-986-8541.

PURPOSES AND ORGANIZATION

With the generous support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and with much-needed local university collaboration, this study had three purposes:

- To report our findings concerning the availability, dissemination, and evaluation of data systems in state and local school districts considered to have exemplary information systems
- To identify and report on the data elements and dissemination needs of D.C. educators, parents, citizens, and public servants regarding issues of elementary, secondary, adult, and higher education in the District
- To make heard the voices of the subjects of data gathering and the main constituencies of educational data.

Findings are designed to assist the SEO with the development of a comprehensive, useful, high-quality public information system that coordinates information on the traditional public school system, charter schools, private schools, and institutions of higher education in the District.

This report is divided into six sections:

I. Introduction
II. Research Design and Methodology
III. Exemplary States and School Districts
IV. Washington, D.C. Results
V. Implications and Conclusions
VI. Recommendations

I. INTRODUCTION

In the District of Columbia, public access to dependable and high-quality education information is urgently needed by

- Families, to make appropriate education decisions on behalf of their children;
- Policy makers, to make sound education policy decisions;
- School administrators, to guide the management of school and school system resources; and
- The nonprofit and for-profit communities, to provide a vast network of resources and services to support the local education systems.

In addition, external pressure from the Federal Government, particularly the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, is forcing policy makers and the education community to make important decisions now that will shape how information is made available in the future.

The creation of the Washington, D.C., State Education Office (SEO) and a willingness by governmental organizations to provide better information make this a pivotal period for D.C. education. The SEO can craft a responsible policy to ensure the creation of, and access to, a high-quality data system desired by the education community; however, this monumental effort cannot be accomplished by the SEO alone. The D.C. Public Schools (DCPS), charter school authorizers, and the local nonprofit and for-profit communities must work together toward this common goal.

For more than a decade, numerous reports have called attention to serious and persistent problems with the availability, reliability, and credibility of information about elementary and secondary education in the District. Causes of the current lack of availability of education data include a lack of internal capacity to manage information and data effectively, personnel shortages and inability to retain staff at all levels, lack of trained staff, lack of long-range planning, and an organizational culture unused to sharing.

The current and proposed opportunities for school choice have made the situation more pronounced as families search for quality information to help them make the best education choices for their children. Providing more accessible information can help DCPS attract parents to enroll their children in their schools.

Several efforts exist across the District to improve upon the current lack of data; however, these efforts are not coordinated and may not include all of the high-quality data needed to provide the clearest picture of the status of education. While these efforts are valuable and move D.C. in the right direction, the very fact that they rely on the current education infrastructure for information is problematic (for the reasons previously noted).

A recent article *(Education Week*, June 12, 2002) suggests that the District is not alone in its paucity of publicly available education data. This article suggests that many other states labor under the same systemic human resource and technical difficulties facing the District. The article also points to a growing trend in public- and private-sector collaboration to create the necessary data information systems. The article attributes the current national movement to improve state-level data systems to the accountability movement, which forces state education departments and local school districts to pay close attention to standardized testing results and longitudinal data.

The private sector is now engaging in these efforts by developing state and school district education data warehouses. These are gaining momentum because they combine student- and school-level information from many different systems into one site. This yields a more comprehensive snapshot of an education system and makes analyses of student outcomes easier to perform and reporting less tedious. Several firms provide software to store and retrieve a multitude of data and assist states and school districts with the development of data storage systems.

Further assistance is available from the New American Schools' Education Performance Network, which provides technical assistance and advises school districts, charter schools, and states on the selection of appropriate accountability models and software systems. The National Center for Educational Accountability *(www.measuretolearn.org)*, which provides assistance to state education policy makers crafting accountability legislation, has created an accountability model that is being implemented in eight states.

National nonprofit organizations are also assisting school districts with data collection, dissemination, and analysis. In addition, the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Forum on Education Statistics collect information about state progress on data support systems and provide information to state and school district personnel interested in improving their data systems.

With all of these elements now converging, education policy makers in the District can take advantage of a wealth of available models to overhaul the DCPS information system, create a system that also captures charter school and other education data, and develop a comprehensive information system.

This research joins two current debates of consequence to the District of Columbia and other cities: the technological divide between constituencies with and without resources and the active inclusion of all constituencies in the process of educational planning.

The District's struggle toward equality in education must include making information accessible to everyone through the most highly technological means possible. In a community with increasing poverty and a high level of illiteracy, this would include both audiovisual and computer technology. In fact, audiovisual technology (by radio and television) is a way that students and parents would like to receive education information. Most frequently, though, students and their parents and teachers want to hear about and share information in personal, face-to-face ways. This raises the issue of how the District can best achieve universality in the use of cutting-edge information technology and still become a model for authentic, interpersonal, culturally sensitive sharing of information about education.

II. Research Design and Methodology

A. Information Needed in the District of Columbia

The first segment of this research focuses on the data and research needs of individuals interested in information on education in the District. Questions such as the following were asked through a questionnaire and focus groups:

- What types of descriptive information are necessary to accurately characterize the quality of education in the District of Columbia?
- What are the appropriate formats for dissemination of education information?
- What reports should the SEO provide to inform parents, teachers, school administrators, and the wider community about the quality of education in the District of Columbia?

1. The Survey Questionnaire

In Spring 2002, a survey questionnaire was sent to a nonrandom sample of 820 individuals in the District, including parents, teachers, principals, DCPS and charter school administrators, community activists, and members of the nonprofit, for-profit, and research communities.

This group represents all of the known local nonprofit groups that provide programs and services related to public education, as well as active parent and teacher groups that would be likely to analyze the data, prepare reports, and disseminate information for the larger community of District residents.

Researchers distributed more than 80 percent of these questionnaires via e-mail and followed up with nonrespondents via the Internet, which improved the response rate. Questionnaires were also distributed at meetings of parent and teacher groups in several wards. A total of 155 completed questionnaires were received, an 18 percent response rate. Because this is an exploratory study of a nonrandom sample of individuals, results cannot be generalized to the population of educators or citizens in the District, and only percentages of respondents who checked off particular responses are reported.

2. Focus Groups

The designers of this research carried out a series of focus groups to ensure the broadest input of parents, students, education practitioners, and government officials. A pilot focus group involved a wide-ranging discussion with teachers to help shape the process. Then other focus groups were organized that

represented students, parents, and policy makers.

Selection of focus group participants was purposive, drawn from DC VOICE's broad-based collaborative network and the careful inclusion of a range of viewpoints. The State Education Office selected policy maker focus group participants to represent a spectrum of decision makers (including charter school leaders) who use information on education in the District.

The immediate enthusiasm among focus group participants led DC VOICE to add more focus groups in a targeted way. Two more student groups and two additional parent groups were added to include participants from a wider set of cultural groups and schools. For example, an elementary school parent focus group was conducted entirely in Spanish, with a Spanish-speaking facilitator, to capture the information needs of bilingual families.

Each focus group ran for approximately an hour, having been set up at a time and place that was convenient for the participants. For example, student and parent focus groups were held either during school hours at schools or after school hours at community organization locations.

Two or three research staff members participated to handle logistics, take notes, and manage tape recorders. A professional transcription firm transcribed all tapes. A separate Spanish-speaking transcriber listened to tapes and provided researchers with translated notes of the Spanish-speaking parents' focus group.

B. Exemplary States and School Districts

The other segment of this research focuses on the current status of education data collection, dissemination, and evaluation in exemplary states and school districts. It is designed to answer questions such as:

- What types and levels of education data are collected and disseminated to the public?
- How are the data organized?
- Who is responsible for collection and dissemination of data?
- What reports are made available to inform educators and citizens about the status of education?
- What mechanisms are used to evaluate and improve the data systems?
- In what ways is the public involved in the process of data collection, dissemination, and evaluation?

Local education experts assisted in the selection of the sites, which are considered to be leading the information management and dissemination movement. Information was also obtained from Education Week's 2002 evaluation of state accountability systems. Site selection was based on information about the amount of data available to the public, perceptions of the ease of access to data, and reports by individuals outside of the bureaucratic structure.

To become more familiar with the availability of education data and dissemination of reports, a thorough review of selected state and local school district websites was conducted. This website analysis was followed by interviews with knowledgeable staff in each site (except in Texas, where a phone interview with appropriate personnel was not conducted).

III. Exemplary States and School Districts

This part of the study examines the current status of education data collection, dissemination, and evaluation in exemplary states and school districts. The eight sites selected for study include Florida; Chicago, Illinois, and the State of Illinois; Montgomery County, Maryland, and the State of Maryland; Michigan; Ohio; and Texas.

A. How Exemplary Jurisdictions Collect Data on Education

1. State-Level Data Collection

States such as Florida, Ohio, and Texas have specific state statutes concerning what education data must be collected and how and what information must be disseminated to the public. In Michigan, recent changes to the state policy for collecting and disseminating information have come through Executive Order.

States maintain the primary responsibility for collecting and warehousing student, school, and school district information, and they direct school district officials in the actual collection and reporting of the data to the various state offices. Many individuals have responsibility for collecting data, maintaining the operation of the information systems, disseminating information, and conducting research. In most instances, the individual most knowledgeable about how all of the individuals and systems operate was housed in the research and accountability office in each site, although finance data are frequently collected in a separate but integrated department.

A multitude of education data elements are collected at the student, grade, and school levels. All sites collect information on student characteristics, teacher characteristics, facilities, finance, and testing. Sites differ in regard to the timelines, level of detail, and which types of school data are collected. In general, most states have little statutory responsibility to collect information from private and home schools and often limited or debated authority over charter schools. Access to information is very easy in most sites because data are available on the Internet.

2. Single-Record Data Collection Systems

The most important issue concerning nearly all the states is the extent to which they are moving toward a single-record system, which is loosely defined as a method of data collection that documents individuals rather than groups (e.g., a school will maintain a separate record for each student's characteristics,

rather than grouped characteristics of the entire student body as a whole). This approach can also be used for teachers and personnel so that each teacher serves as a unit of analysis, rather than the faculty of the school overall. In this way, although a state may still be collecting the same types of data (e.g., the number of girls in a school), in a single-record system that figure would be aggregated up from a set of records for each student, rather than from an overall count of the school. For-profit providers are helping to create this type of system.

This "microfocused" approach has various benefits and costs. For instance, it can allow a state to track individual student or teacher progress over several years. This is critical for rigorous measurement of issues like adequate yearly progress and school accountability, but not nearly as feasible with more generalized data collection. However, this is a costly change to make. It is apparent from this research that the change to a single-record system is perceived by school districts as time-consuming and expensive. In certain cases, school districts have resisted changes and forced states to reimburse them for new requirements.

Despite the student-focused trend in some states, most states and school districts currently report information at the grade and school levels. While some states, such as Ohio, Texas, and Florida, are far along in the process of moving toward single-record collection, others are still in the early planning stages. This reorientation of data collection from the district or school down to the student has important technological, political, and privacy considerations; however, states are working with software developers to ensure the confidentiality of student information.

As previously mentioned, the data-warehousing movement is providing the momentum for states, school districts, and charter schools to move toward a single-record student system. This movement is interesting because it increases the role of for-profit providers in public education. Large multinational firms, including IBM and Northrop Grumman, and smaller, education-specific firms, such as EdSmart and eScholar, are marketing data warehouse systems to states and localities; however, these smaller firms may better understand the complex relationships between state and local education agencies.

3. Exemplary State and County Data Collection Systems

Florida has a well-evolved system of educational data collection that relates directly to state policy. Written into state law are specific mandates regarding collection and reporting of data, as well as the roles and responsibilities concerning these activities. Florida also has a thorough system of making changes to data collection policies by routinely checking amendments to state law, federal mandates, and changes in program-level needs and by maintaining a running list of public comments and questions. The Florida State Department of Education will add to its data collection when triggered by any of these processes. While Florida collects most of its data centrally, a separate unit within the State collects finance information.

Maryland does not use a fully linked single-record system, but does focus its data collection at the student level. Maryland has several data sets that are aggregated up from student-level records, but these data sets are not internally linked. A fully linked system is viewed as unnecessary and is complicated by the state's preference for local control. In order to overcome a cumbersome process of consulting with dis-

trict information officials for each change, the state now works directly with county superintendents at monthly meetings. It is believed that this change has helped speed the change process and overcome hesitancy of district officials.

At the district level, **Montgomery County, Maryland,** clearly articulates the way it organizes its educational data activities within the newly created Office of Shared Accountability. The county details specific responsibilities to this office: educational research and evaluation; standardized testing; statistical gathering, analysis, and reporting; management studies; and fiscal/operations auditing. Further, its policy clearly links the collection of data to a reporting responsibility to the public "free of charge in a timely manner." County education officials are in the process of creating a data warehouse to replace their current information systems.

Michigan is nearing the end of a transition from an old system of data reporting and collection to a new single-record system, called the MEIS Data Warehouse, the single source of all state educational information. This change was precipitated by increased attention from the former Governor to produce more rigorous research on education. He was credited with much of the energy and political will to reorient and improve data collection through reorganization of the State Department of Education. One significant result was the movement of a key data collection office out of the State Department of Education into the State Budget Office. The new office, the Center for Educational Performance and Information, has initiated a plan to focus more on student-/teacher-/personnel-level data collection.

This change has not occurred without resistance on the part of the school districts, which have had success in the past in bringing class action suits against the state to resist calls for data that were not legislatively mandated. The state is now more aware of the need to connect specific state mandates with data collection requests and also of the need to find a "chemistry" with the districts. The political clout of the districts slowed an initially aggressive overhaul of the system and resulted in an eventual compromise to pay $2 per student to the districts specifically to defray data collection costs. Despite the opposition, state officials believe that the tenor and focus of the original plans have been maintained.

Ohio has standards in place to collect a vast amount of student, finance, and staff information. The State Board of Education has the responsibility to adopt rules for a statewide education management information system and guidelines for the maintenance of the system. Its primary information system, EMIS, comprises student, finance, and staff information. Additional information systems exist that house data on child nutrition, transportation, and early childhood.

Texas also has a well-developed system of data collection and dissemination, called the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), "a system of accountability based primarily on student performance." Texas now collects and disseminates large amounts of data through 20 educational service centers and private vendors, using 1) standard sets of definitions, 2) standard edit procedures, 3) an established database design, 4) a production system for formatting and loading data, and 5) written documentation describing the numeric and alpha values.

Illinois stands at the opposite end of the spectrum. The state is the least advanced technologically

of all the sites surveyed, with an old website that is not useful and relying on paper distribution of most reports. This has resulted in the state feeling a good deal more pressure (than Maryland, for example) from the new federal priorities of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). As a part of adjusting to the new NCLB requirements, Illinois is organizing districts, businesses, and parent groups to collaborate on making changes to data collection policies, partly because of the perceived power these groups have in state politics. The state currently has plans for a new data warehouse to update its system.

B. Data Dissemination in Exemplary Jurisdictions

1. Data Formats and Dissemination of Data Elements

Data dissemination concerns the methods that states and local school districts use to inform the education community and the public about the quality of education in their jurisdictions. All states and districts make some raw data available to individuals who are interested in conducting research. The Internet is now widely used as the mechanism for dissemination; however, the formats for dissemination vary. Five of the eight sites make information available via MS Excel or other database software; all use the portable document format (pdf), which does not allow for manipulation of the data.

One of the most interesting data dissemination projects has been initiated by the State of **Michigan,** which has contracted with Standard and Poor's (S&P) to present web-based reports and raw data on schools, districts, and charter schools. The state views S&P as an unbiased reporting service and does not direct the nature of the reporting. S&P focuses on tracking financial data to educational outcomes. The state retains ownership of the underlying data, but the presentation, reporting, and other formatting issues are owned by S&P. The state and other sources provide data to S&P for the website. Michigan also provides extensive raw data at its own websites.

Access and privacy are key issues for all of the locations. For instance, Michigan uses a unique number (Unique Identification Code) assigned during the data transformation process to maintain compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, which guards confidentiality and access. This site has developed a series of security levels (1–5) that permit different individuals different opportunities to view, edit, and use the data. Michigan also has a Human Subject Review process for nonpublic data. Further, state policy requires blocking out any grouped results with six or fewer students or educational personnel because personal information might be recognized.

2. Reporting Data in Exemplary Jurisdictions

One of the most widespread forms of reporting across the states is "school report cards." Florida, Ohio, and Illinois are examples of states that must abide by state laws that require distribution of school report cards. These report cards, often called "school profiles," contain information on schools, student outcomes, and demographics; however, some states, like Florida, use this information to reward or punish schools and school districts. All sites in this study provide some form of a school profile to the public.

Florida's reporting is done primarily via the web. The state also does large-scale reporting and analysis of data and develops school profiles that are distributed to the districts. Finally, Florida reports a considerable amount of data on nontraditional education, in particular nonpublic and home schooling.

Illinois must distribute hard copy reports to districts, which are then required to paper mail them to parents of the students in local schools. Illinois currently has legislation pending that would allow for this distribution to be done electronically, saving money and time. Illinois produces state report cards that are downloadable at its website. In addition, the state produces "issue scanning" reports in which it summarizes and analyzes data. Most of these reports are distributed by request in paper format. The City of Chicago links to the Illinois report cards, rather than generating its own set. The City of **Chicago** also produces several summary reports for the city.

Maryland is the only site that identified specific outreach plans. The state works with several universities and a business roundtable. Much of this effort is focused on informing the education community about data and the way data can help school improvement. This state has a website viewed as directed toward the education community. The state also maintains a second website that houses school report cards and is viewed as geared toward school accountability, rather than school improvement. Maryland is also exemplary for its focus on communicating with the public. Particularly through its website, the state provides excellent information about its graphs and ways of analyzing the data provided.

In addition to the districtwide and school reports available through the Maryland State Education Office, **Montgomery County** distributes *Schools at a Glance*, which is a document for the public, educators, and policy makers. It contains countywide data and school information on enrollment, staffing, facilities, capital budgets, student outcomes, operating costs, and education load. Although not currently available on-line, it is distributed to each school and available at public libraries. District administrators are now in the process of creating school report cards, which will provide more school-level information than is available in Schools at a Glance.

In addition to the S&P dissemination of reports, **Michigan** also produces internal reports; however, few reports are now available on the web, possibly because of the recent organizational shifts in the State Department of Education, and the state does not produce readily available report cards or profiles.

Ohio produces school report cards that are available on- and off-line, and the state provides a multitude of data via downloadable spreadsheets. Internet users are able to create customized school or district reports (through the state's interactive local report card system) or generate a standard report card. The interactive system allows users to compare data elements across selected school districts or schools, including charter schools. Special reports are prepared by the Policy Research Division of the State Department of Education. These reports are available on-line; however, the report cards are intended to be the main vehicle of information for the public.

Texas has a Research and Evaluation Division that produces considerable research, using state education data and a searchable web page to download pdf versions of the reports. Texas also produces annual school district "snapshots," similar to report cards or profiles, which are available back to 1994–1995.

No site provides training to individuals outside the education system to learn about the various kinds of information available to the public. Internal training is provided at a minimum, in most instances. For example, in Ohio, the EMIS director annually trains department staff, but there are not enough resources for additional training of nonessential employees or the public. In Florida, the state convenes school district leaders once a year to discuss changes in statutes and other issues related to data collection.

C. Data Quality and Evaluation of Data in Exemplary Jurisdictions

Data quality is a high priority in the District of Columbia because there is concern that the currently available data are of poor quality. For sites that were examined, most rely on computerized data auditing/integrity programs to check data as the first stage in their data evaluation process. The most sophisticated (Ohio, Florida, and Michigan) appear to check current data against past years to identify anomalies or inconsistencies.

Problems are then followed up with the districts reporting the data. Maryland identified this as a major time-consuming endeavor and hoped to improve reporting procedures to minimize errors in reporting and speed turnaround time. Following up on errors adds significant labor and time costs to otherwise straightforward processes. To limit errors, many sites talked about making progress to improve the district data gathering.

Ohio also provided for public input during the development and redevelopment of its school report card. During the initial production, six focus groups were held with parents of school-aged children and adults without school children. Later, focus groups were held to review a revised card.

None of the sites studied completes an external audit of nonfinancial data. Internal staff members are responsible for ensuring a high-quality data information system. Many sites rely on special software, which identifies technical inputting reporting errors. No site currently evaluates the level of satisfaction that various stakeholders have with its data collection and dissemination efforts.

IV. WASHINGTON, D.C. RESULTS

A. SURVEY RESULTS: DATA ELEMENTS

This section reports survey findings on the data elements that study participants believe should be collected and made available to the public by the State Education Office. Data elements can be either quantitative [e.g., pieces of information in a percentaged format for a particular unit (student, grade, school, district) of analysis or interest] or qualitative (e.g., nonnumeric text). An example of a quantitative data element is the percentage of students in the third grade of a particular school who are promoted to the fourth grade. The SEO, DCPS, charter school authorities, researchers, and practitioners use such data to evaluate school programs and services.

Questionnaires were administered through a web-based program called Zoomerang.com, which provides for survey distribution via the Internet. Survey responses are automatically tabulated as respondents enter data, which are then transferable to a spreadsheet format.

Surveys were initially e-mailed to recipients, with a follow-up e-mail, if necessary. Subsequent phone calls were made to targeted individuals to increase the response rate. In addition, survey questionnaires were distributed at meetings of local parent and teacher organizations and at a DCPS superintendents' conference, but responses were most heavily from participants with institutional or organizational membership, with electronic capacity. Of 850 questionnaires distributed, the response rate was 18% (155).

1. Basic Information

Because the State Education Office is exploring the possibility of a comprehensive data system on D.C. education opportunities, the first question on the survey broadly addresses the interest level of respondents for each category of education opportunity available in the District:

QUESTION: *What kinds of schools and educational programs do you think should be included in a publicly accessible state-level database about education in the District of Columbia?*

The following responses to this initial question were overwhelmingly positive and suggest that survey respondents are interested in information for all aspects of elementary and secondary education, as well as higher education (the percentage of respondents indicating an interest in each option is reported):

- 93% would like information concerning D.C. public schools
- 86% – public charter schools
- 82% – adult education programs
- 79% – college and university programs
- 72% – technical training
- 63% – parochial schools
- 63% – private elementary and secondary schools
- 55% – home schooling

The survey next asked recipients how data should be grouped by the SEO. Respondents appear most likely to prefer school-level data, systemwide totals, and by grade within school. Fewer respondents are interested in student-level data. Percentage distributions are as follows:

- 81% of respondents would like DCPS school-level data
- 75% – systemwide data for all D.C. public schools combined (e.g., annual attendance figures citywide)
- 71% – charter school-level data
- 63% – grade-level data by school
- 57% – postsecondary school-level data
- 25% – student-level data by school

The next three sections of results concern the identification of specific data elements that respondents would like the SEO to make available across various education categories.

2. Data Elements – Pre-K through 12th Grade

This section reports the percentage of individuals who selected items in 10 categories of elementary and secondary education data.

Basic School. Survey respondents most frequently requested this first category of data elements. More than three-fourths of individuals responding to the survey would like contact and location information available in a public information system. Other information requests include social services available for students at schools (74% of respondents), each school's mission (69%), and basic information on school leadership (68%). More than two-thirds of the respondents also desire public transportation (e.g., availability/proximity of transportation to school) and school safety data (e.g., reported number of crimes on/near school grounds).

Budget. Survey respondents also desire budget and actual revenue data, particularly at the school level, where 66% of respondents requested these elements. Respondents are also very interested in systemwide budgetary data, which include school district administrative units as well as school totals. More than one-half of survey respondents also desire data on outside grants received by the district administration and schools.

English Language Learners. Data concerning student involvement in English language programs are also

sought after by more than two-thirds of the survey respondents. Enrollment in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs is desired by 70% of respondents, along with ESL program information (70%) and data on the number of students whose home language is not English (68%).

Facilities. Survey respondents appear very interested in a range of school facilities data elements. Respondents most frequently prefer information on accessibility for the handicapped at the school level (73% of respondents), followed by information on school science laboratories. Seventy percent of respondents would also like the SEO to make a school picture available. More than one-half of survey respondents are interested in data concerning school athletic facilities, vocational laboratories, library book holdings, school renovations and improvements, and school building age.

School Programs. The questionnaire presented a series of items related to the availability of special school-level programs. The most frequently noted data elements that individuals would like access to in a publicly accessible database are before- and after-school day care information (80% of respondents). However, more than two-thirds of the respondents also desire all of the additional school program options included on the survey, which may suggest an unmet need for more programmatic information than is currently available.

Special Education. Survey respondents also seek special education data. More than three-fourths of the respondents would like information on the types of special education programs available in the District, while nearly two-thirds would like data related to the level and number of special education students and information on special education partnerships.

Student Information.

- *Basic.* Three-fourths of the respondents requested data on enrollment and student demographics. More than 60 percent of survey respondents also would like information concerning the number of students in free/reduced lunch programs (64%), number of homeless students (60%), and country of origin other than the United States (60%). Student mobility data are sought by less than one-half of the survey respondents (48%).
- *Performance.* While the education community agrees that no one measure of student outcome should be used alone, there are several measures that, when used collectively, provide a picture of how well students perform. Survey recipients were asked to rate their level of interest in access to these various measures. Three-fourths of survey respondents were most likely to desire data concerning high school graduation rates (75%) and students going on to higher education (74%). More than two-thirds requested information on annual standardized test scores and on attendance and suspension rates. Respondents also show an interest in information concerning awards to students, promotion rates, and the number of juniors taking the SAT.

Teacher Qualifications and Performance. Access to teacher-quality data is also highly desired by survey respondents, particularly information on teacher degrees and/or certification in the field in which currently teaching (73%), teacher turnover by school (70%) and systemwide, and a measure of teacher experience (e.g., years of full-time teaching). Other frequently requested data include additional infor-

mation on teacher qualifications such as teacher specialties and the number of years that teachers have taught their current subject(s).

3. Data Elements – Adult Education

Respondents are very interested in all categories of information on adult education opportunities in the District presented in the survey:

- 74% of respondents are interested in information regarding GED programs
- 71% – English as a Second Language programs
- 66% – technical training programs
- 56% – tuition assistance for displaced workers

4. Data Elements – Colleges and Universities

In response to questions related to higher education opportunities, information on the Tuition Assistance Grant program and on certificate and professional programs are the most sought after by all groups responding to the survey:

- 70% of respondents would like access to information regarding the Tuition Assistance Grant program
- 69% – certificate and professional programs
- 66% – degree programs
- 64% – public institutions
- 56% – private institutions

5. Miscellaneous Information

The final set of questions relates to miscellaneous data elements, including awards to schools and faculty and comparative data from other jurisdictions. More than one-half of survey respondents are interested in access to this information. (Details are available from DC VOICE.)

These results suggest that respondents are interested in a wide variety of data elements concerning elementary and secondary schools in the District of Columbia. Survey respondents most frequently requested access to information on basic school contacts, school programs (particularly day care availability), school themes, science labs, at-risk student populations, graduation rates and continuance in higher education, and teacher certification and turnover.

B. Survey Results: Data Dissemination

Because the SEO is interested in dissemination of data and reports that inform the public about the condition of education in the District of Columbia, the survey also addressed these concerns with the following questions:

QUESTION: *How should the education data be provided to the public?* (Respondents were asked to check all

items that answered this question for them; no priorities were sought.)

- 87% of respondents would like the data available via the Internet
- 56% – available upon request via e-mail, possibly in hard copy
- 52% – published in the media
- 40% – automatically if on a mailing list
- 31% – at each school
- 25% – at educational workshops provided by the SEO

QUESTION: *What periodic reports on the status of education in the District would you like the SEO to develop and produce?*

The overwhelming response to this question requests the development of 1) school report cards, which include information on standardized achievement tests and other measures of student outcomes, and 2) student and school characteristics for each school, compared with other schools or district totals.

The second most requested type of reporting concerns teacher-quality data, such as certification and qualification information. Other reports requested include a financial report (which includes district- and school-level information), an annual review of the SEO to determine how the office is meeting its goals, an annual enrollment report, an annual report of school-level program information, and an annual report of the status of special education in the District.

C. Focus Groups Results: What Information Do You Need?

Focus group discussions deepened the results of this study by contributing viewpoints not revealed by the survey. These points of view contributed additional school information requirements and detailed elements for data collection, a range of ways for schools to disseminate information, and perceived obstacles to that dissemination. (The following data elements are not discussed in priority order.)

1. Careers, College Preparation, College Search, and Financial Aid

Students in focus groups (from various high schools) planned to continue their education after graduation. Their most clearly expressed information needs centered on careers and college. Students want to know how to prepare for college academically and financially: "I think the schools should give you information to make [the SATs] easier for students." "I think my school should [be] more aware about financial aid and scholarships." One line of discussion was that career possibilities and college preparation information should be presented in elementary school, in junior high school, and beginning in ninth grade in high schools.

Parents also want more information on careers and college for their children. Parents are concerned about the disparity in career and college information made available at various schools. One parent says, "Not all schools have the same system, and some schools communicate more with children and parents; [for] example, children and parents in a particular school have received information about student loans for college, and other schools do not share the same."

2. School Information

Students, parents, and policy makers were concerned about the lack of consistent information about various school options. They said they need details about each school, program or curricular options, ways schools collaborate, high school entry, and graduation requirements.

Students want more "interaction with other schools" to find out about "courses at other schools" and about the ways in which schools already "collaborate" with one another, with the idea that information sharing among schools can strengthen student learning.

Parents want information about out-of-boundary assignment rules, high school placement information, and graduation regulations for various schools to help them make school choices for their children.

Policy makers want information presented on each school program and philosophy, on schools with special education and advanced placement programs, and on the social and emotional supports provided through each school. Says a charter school leader: "Whenever we get calls from parents, ...they want to know if there's anything special that the school does, that kind of identifies it compared to other schools."

3. School Security and Safety

Policy makers joined with parents and students in their concern about the safety and security of schools. One of the **student** focus groups discussed the laxity of security measures in place at one of the high schools, a reality that differed from what had been communicated about school security rules. **Parents** expressed "concern about security outside the school, despite cameras being around." Parents want to be given specifics "about problems happening around the neighborhood of the school."

Policy makers want to know: "What's the building like? Is it safe?" Policy makers acknowledge that "there's very poor data" on school safety. Even in multischool surveys, "data that comes from the kids ...the levels of knives or guns...that the kids reveal is very, very different from what we would get from the faculty .... Unless that's done across the board, in a way that's school-specific, ...you really don't have a feel for that whole set of issues."

4. Rights and Responsibilities of Students and Parents Regarding Education

Students and parents shared concerns about not knowing about their full rights and responsibilities with regard to education. A **student** says: "They just like to tell us the rules and regulations of the school, you know, the codes...." Another student asserts: "No teachers [ever] talked about the rights that we have as students."

Parents need information to assure them that they have a right to assert themselves about their children's education. A parent activist says: "I would want parents to know that there are things that they can do to make sure that the school is doing [its] part... . Your child could be failing in a class and not doing well, and it could be not the child, but the teacher."

5. Special Education Laws, Rules, and Procedures

Parents, teachers, and policy makers want more and better information about special education for children in the District. They desire the following types of information:

- Federal and District laws on special education
- Policies on inclusion of students with special needs
- Rules and procedures for creating individual education plans (IEPs) and 504 plans
- New laws that affect children's education
- Styles of special education programs offered at each school

A **parent** described the experience of another parent whom she tried to help: "Under...the Free and Appropriate Education [Law], you would have a right to place your child in the right school....This parent doesn't even have basic information on free and appropriate education.... Special ed could have tested her child, given him an IEP within 120 days."

A **teacher** expresses the need for more information on special education at her school: "We need clearer communication for those of us who are on TAC [assessment] teams, as to what our responsibilities are and what we can do for these children, because there are things like the 504 plan that I know at our school we have no instruction on how to write. We didn't even know that that was supposed to exist until last year, and we still don't know what we can and can't do and what the laws really are."

A **policy maker** finds that the need for better information "comes up a lot in the context of special ed...with the data necessary from charter schools...because the school system...has responsibilities that are impossible to [carry out]...if you don't have the data."

6. Student Assessments and Progress in School

Policy makers and parents want information about assessments and progress of youngsters in school. **Policy makers** are interested in standardized test data that show an individual child's progress through grade levels. A policy maker who also is a parent states: "The only kind of data that's worth anything is, for my individual child, how well is he doing now compared to how well he was doing last year, and two years ago, and three years ago?"

Similarly, **parents** in parent focus groups want information so that they can help their children progress: information on their children's learning styles, the expectations for their children, the requirements for standardized tests, the status of their children in school (including test scores), and the procedures used to assign youngsters to particular classrooms. An elementary school parent says, "I find that a lot of parents don't know what the standardized test requires the children to know." And another says, "We need information on how to help our children, how to identify different learning styles, and what our rights are in the system."

7. Parent Support, Involvement, and Satisfaction

Teachers and policy makers want information on supports for parents and on parent involvement.

A **teacher** says, " [We need]...information that says we'll help you with parenting skills..., information that says that if you want to go back and get your GED,...we care about your family." A charter school **decision maker** says, "In terms of evaluating the charter schools,...one real question is how...do the parents who have chosen the school...feel about the school?"

8. Information on Teachers, Such as Salary Pay Scales, Recruitment and Hiring Practices, and Content Expertise

Students ask: "How are teachers chosen?" "Why is [our] principal paid $99,000?" **Teachers** assert: "[We] need to be more proactive about portraying teachers as professionals and about mentioning the good things that we do." **Policy makers** want information on the numbers of various types of teachers: "If someone in my office goes, 'How many teachers are there in the system?'...I should have the answer at the tip of my hand." Another says, "You know, I'm constantly getting calls about salary information which we don't keep; no one keeps."

9. School Administration and Budget Breakdowns

Students want to know about "budget use" and "money spent on certain things" that may be a "waste of money." Students also want to know what's going on in all the schools, and they want to share information that other schools may get.

Teachers seem to feel alienated from the DCPS administration. "I don't know who to call for anything," says a middle school teacher. As a result, teachers want basic information on structural changes occurring in the school system. A teacher says, "We depend on [administration]...if we need information,...[but] as teachers, we're left...not knowing what's going on."

D. Focus Group Results: How Do You Want to Get Education Information?

Focus groups went beyond the survey to a broader discussion of how participants would prefer to receive education information. This perspective leads to insights about the desire for more personal means of communication and more intimacy in education, as well as the need to empower community members in the use of information technology.

Represented below are categories of information requested, although there were numerous additional specific data elements sought by the various stakeholders. (For more details, please contact DC VOICE.)

1. Through Oral, Person-to-Person Communication

Members of focus groups discussed personal, oral communication (e.g., telephone calls, plain-spoken visits and conferences, workshops, or community meetings) as the way they would prefer to receive information about education in Washington, reflecting a desire to reconstruct a sense of "village." Policy

makers whose professional needs leaned toward technical, computerized information acknowledged that parents rely on oral communication.

Students want to get information orally through school personnel, through family members and friends, through visits to other schools and institutions in the city, and through school visitors. A high school student says: "Just talk to teachers, that's the easiest way for me." Says another, "I just...talk to people [friends] around me."

Parents like to get information orally on the telephone, in conversations with other parents, in conversations with teachers, in workshops and other school outreach, and through community organizations. A parent says, "We need a parent hotline. They need a hotline where you can call...and say, 'Well, this is my problem.'" Another parent says: "Parents need to know—we need some education educating our parents.... We need some parent workshops."

Teachers want more face-to-face interaction with administrators and officials, time to interact with other teachers, interaction with parents, and community meetings. Teachers see the need for a special support structure to convey all the information that new teachers require.

Teachers also felt that better personal communication would happen through a different school system structure that would be more decentralized for more face-to-face interaction and more partnerships with social service agencies.

A teacher says, "I don't know whom to call." "[We have] only had departmentwide meetings once a year at the beginning of the year.... [We] need to have them more across all grade levels." Another asserts, "Those people who are at the helm, who are in the positions to effect change directly, need to make a concerted effort to actually come into the schools, not just like a cameo appearance or whatever." Another says, "I think the community meetings are key. You need to meet with all of the stakeholders, just like a successful business will."

2. Through Culturally Sensitive Communication, Carefully Translated and in Uncomplicated English

Parents in particular want information communicated in ways that are patient, reassuring, nonintimidating to parents, and more culturally sensitive. "[Parents] want...information that is bilingual so that they can understand it," was the consensus among Spanish speakers in a parent focus group. "It's difficult for [some] parents to try to help their children because we have parents that can't read. So that's why we need to try to tell parents...that we can help them," says a parent activist.

3. Through Audio and Visual Media Communication of Education Information

Students, parents, and teachers are aware that many shareholders in education in Washington are unable to access computerized or even written information because they are either computer-illiterate or literally illiterate. So members of focus groups discussed a number of audio and visual ways for information to be communicated:

- School public address systems and radio stations
- School access to cable television
- Ads on radio and television
- Audiotapes in parent center
- The Internet, through school computers
- The Internet, through home computers
- A public relations campaign

A D.C. public school **parent** says: "I'd like to see you use that D.C. 28 station to give parents information....You want to know about special ed, you want to know about graduation requirements, you want to know about day care, after care, early admission? Any information should be readily accessible, not only [through] the Internet and newsletters, but also audio, because you know when you try to reach parents, you'd be surprised. You have grandparents raising children...who aren't educated, and they don't know about the computer.... You need to be able to have something they can watch on television. You need to have something on the radio. You need to have things in communities, to get parents in workshops.... Parents should be able to access information from several different areas."

The paradox revealed here is one shared worldwide. Individuals and groups all over the world are seeking to preserve, return to, or capture a sense of face-to-face respect and community while at the same time wanting to take full and equitable advantage of mass means of communication, especially the audio-visual media.

4. Through Written Communication about Education

While students, parents, and teachers talked mostly about nonwritten ways of receiving information on education, focus groups also identified written forms of communication.

Students were enthusiastic about newsletters to students, mailed to them at home. A focus group facilitator probed, "Would you have time for...a newsletter...if it came to you?" Students responded favorably. They want to receive information by mail, on bulletin boards, through the school library, by e-mail, and by fax.

Parents also want information sent home by mail, "one side in English and the other side in Spanish."

While **policy maker** focus group members view the school system's beginning-of-the-year booklet and the DCPS Parent Newsletter as vehicles for relaying information to parents, parents want booklets and the school system handbook to be written in a way they can understand. "[These publications have] such big words,...it's intimidating.... [You're] like, 'Whew, I just went through this whole book, and I still don't understand what it is.'" "They give us a...handbook.... I said, 'I don't understand this. Is there someone I could talk to who could explain this to me?'"

Teachers want a school system directory and a directory of human resources so they can make phone calls for support. One teacher suggested, "Newsletters that ANCs [Advisory Neighborhood Com-

missions] could share with one another" would be a desirable way to convey information about education in D.C.

5. Through a Central Agency that Gathers Information on All Types of Schools

Many **policy makers** and education decision makers want a centralized database for education information in Washington. Information might be collated by the DCPS, the D.C. Board of Education, the city's Chief Financial Officer, or the State Education Office, they suggest.

A policy maker complains, "I've got stacks of data that [are] unanalyzed because there's no one in the center [who is] crunching the numbers in a regular way." Another policy maker says, "I think the SEO [State Education Office] should be the gatherer of this information....There has to be a way to have tremendous coordination with this, and...agency buy-in so there isn't blockage. So there has to be agreement on the importance of the data, that it will lead to something, and how an independent information system at this point in history is going to help us."

Policy makers want information that is standardized and "sanitized" or "scrubbed" to protect individual privacy and to provide a shield from biased reporting of data that is centrally gathered. "I would say that we are obligated [only] to give you data based on our mission.... We can cooperate in all sorts of ways; but I think we do have to protect our employees...to do their job."

E. Focus Group Results: Obstacles to Getting Information on Education

Focus group participants identified several obstacles they encounter when they seek information about education in the District:

- The D.C. Public School System and its schools do not convey information openly or thoroughly.
- Neglected yet important groups of stakeholders—students, parents, teachers—do not feel that they have a say in getting the information and how it is disseminated.
- The protection of information about individuals, groups, and institutions involved in education—though critical—conflicts, obscures, and interferes with getting more transparent and available information that people feel entitled to receive.

Parent participants felt that DCPS was deliberately not providing information (e.g., special education regulations) to parents so that they "can stay in the dark" about their rights. They also noted the lack of resources at the DCPS central office, which made it difficult for them to get adequate answers to their questions.

Policy makers recognized that data currently are not being collected in any common way across schools; for example, the dropout rate is an important indicator lacking a clear definition. This group also focused on some of the obstacles to collecting and disseminating education information in the District, including the lack of linkages between various District agencies such as DCPS, Health and Human Services,

and Mental Health. They also mentioned the lack of personnel to evaluate the system and a lack of will to conduct a thorough evaluation. They thought that the technology exists to adequately collect and disseminate the information; however, no process exists for using the technology, and no common software is used within or across agencies.

Several **students** felt that the biggest obstacle to getting data was their parents' lack of interest in obtaining the information, perhaps due to their fear of talking to teachers and administrators. For the most part, students recognized their need to stay informed about issues that mattered to them.

Teachers in focus group discussed these obstacles: difficulties with the DCPS Central Administration, their lack of information about personnel and instructional changes, and the inconsistency of the Administration over the past several years.

1. The D.C. Public School System and Its Schools Do Not Convey Information Openly or Thoroughly

Students feel that the school system and some personnel may intentionally present obstacles to the free flow of information to students and their parents: "They just give us the information that they benefit from. Like if [we] knew our rights, they wouldn't benefit from that," says one student. Other students assert, "Teachers don't say [things] because they are afraid of getting fired." "[The school] needs to inform parents." "Information is filtered by the administration; parents need more detail." "They should have like more Spanish-speaking people in our schools."

Parents feel that an obstacle is the inconsistent distribution of information among schools. Spanish-speaking parents asked that "information be distributed consistently and uniformly among schools."

Teachers contend that the school system is so centralized that the sharing of information through personal communication is inhibited. Says a long-time teacher, "It [communication in the past] was a personal thing. It's so impersonal now." Another teacher agrees: "They're top-heavy.... An assistant to the assistant superintendent is ridiculous." Says another, "You know if there's too many people in that chain, then the communication gets lost; it becomes crazy."

Lack of consistency in personnel is an obstacle to the free flow of information. A policy maker observed: "[Continuity]...is not going to happen if you change staff every two or three years." **Policy makers** also see the decentralization of information gathering and dissemination as an obstacle. "You know, getting stuff from schools sometimes is like pulling teeth," says a policy maker. This problem is true of charter schools as well as regular public schools. "Smaller schools especially...find it more difficult...to collect...data, because it's about having the personnel to really update the information and keep it current," says a charter school decision maker.

2. Neglected Yet Important Groups of Stakeholders—Students, Parents, Teachers—Do Not Feel that They Have a Say in Getting the Information and How It Is Disseminated

- **Student Disempowerment as an Obstacle**

Students are in the middle of an adult-created information technology dilemma. Computers often are not available in the homes of D.C. students, and computers are in short supply in almost all schools.

D.C. education information on the web is usually not "kid-friendly"; therefore, even when students may have access to computers, they do not seem to use them for their own information and empowerment. "At our school," says one teenager, "they've got a website you could go to. And you could get information, make comments and stuff, to the teacher,...leave...messages, and talk to them about what's going on.... I don't have time." Another student remarks, "[Our] teacher has a website, but [it's] not accessed by a lot of students." "Are your parents currently using the Internet to find out about your schools?" asked a focus group facilitator. "No!" was the chorus of responses.

- **Parent Disempowerment as an Obstacle**

Students find that their parents don't understand their role in relation to schools and don't know about how to help their student offspring. Some parents are thought by some students to lack interest in schools. On the other hand, some parents are unable to read or speak the language of school personnel: "Some students can't get help from parents that can't read."

Teachers say, "Some parents aren't comfortable talking to teachers. They feel... embarrassed,...because maybe their speech isn't good enough. I have many parents who come up with translators, and when we're talking with the translators,...we're having trouble with the people who are translating. But...some people feel like their education isn't high enough to talk to the teachers, and some teachers give them that impression."

- **Teacher Disempowerment as an Obstacle**

Teachers, on the other hand, seem to view themselves as victims of public misconceptions due to their lack of input into decision making. For example, one teacher ponders: "I often wonder if...everyone is aware of our needs and our problems, but I don't know that people really are. I think...that's why change can't be made because they don't get to talk to us, and they [have an] impression of us, and that's it."

Another teacher laments the lack of teacher input into how data or information generally is communicated: "I think a lot of decisions that are made by educators, administrators, consultants in the field...that directly impact both teachers and students alike are devoid of...classroom teacher input, and I feel that we are the experts."

3. The Protection of Information about Individuals, Groups, and Institutions Involved in Education—Though Critical—Conflicts, Obscures, and Interferes with Getting More Transparent and Available Information that People Feel Entitled to Receive

Policy makers discussed a number of obstacles to getting information about education. They

agreed that concerns about protection of information and the potential misuse of school information are an obstacle to sharing data.

One policy maker says: "If you put data out there that's essentially almost raw data,...not grouped, not filtered in various ways that are well described, then you run into the danger of all kinds of misinformation being out there.... You're essentially going to have all kinds of stuff being generated, and no way to tell how it was generated, what the quality of the data is, whether the right filters were applied, whether the analysis was done correctly."

Shielding information that may be misrepresented, misinterpreted, and/or lead to criticism also contributes to the lack of cooperation among agencies in the city to coordinate data gathering and reporting.

On the other hand, local government officials, pressured by the demands of their work, also see a point in having independent, nongovernmental groups report data: "Quite often, we don't have the opportunity or...the capacity to research ourselves and to figure out what it is that we need,...and I think that very often what's helpful to me is when outside entities do this kind of research.... I'm pretty grateful to let these outside people do it."

Some other focus group participants see the lack of state-level oversight as an obstacle to education information consistency: "I don't think there's...a real strong state-level force that says this is what everybody is required to do and this is how everybody should report it,...and in the absence of that, all of the entities [are] sort of doing their 'best shot' at it, doing what they think is good. But that's what creates an obstacle in having the appropriate comparisons."

4. Resistance on the Part of Charter Schools, Religious-Based and Other Private Schools to Sharing Information

Many charter schools and religious-based and other private schools do not want to cooperate in sharing information, nor do participants in some public schools. A charter school decision maker says, "The Public Charter School Board and the Board of Education...collect a lot of data, but they...have not seen their role...as providing the data they collect to the public." This leads to schools not being on the same wavelength. "There is not a common software that's used, [which] would facilitate things coming out in the same way. Basically these are separate school districts, and they bought what they wanted to use for their districts." Charter schools, born out of a critique of the public school system, have participants who are suspicious of central bureaucratic governance.

Thus, there is no mandate, like that which exists at the state level in most other jurisdictions, to ensure that public schools (including charters), and religious-based and other private schools collect, maintain records on, and turn over mutually compatible information on even the most basic student and school characteristics. Moreover, there may be a culture of nonconformity among various types of schools in the District of Columbia.

V. Implications and Conclusions

This study presents the voices of the public who feel that there is a great urgency for the SEO to construct an ample data system that includes:

- Elementary and secondary school information for all schools—public, charter, and parochial and other private schools;
- Adult education information, particularly on GED and English language programs; and
- Higher education information, especially on certificate programs and the Tuition Assistance Grant.

This research project examined issues surrounding data collection, dissemination, and evaluation in exemplary state and local education authorities. To help determine how the data/information system should be structured, systems in other states were studied with the following results:

- Most sites are moving toward a single-record system, which tracks students and teachers over time and combines multiple information sources into one system or data warehouse.
- All sites currently disseminate school report cards and a wide amount of school- and district-level information to the public.
- All sites have comprehensive websites to allow for dissemination of information and provide data using multiple formats (e.g., pdf, html, and MS Excel).
- Most sites rely on software systems and internal staff to ensure high-quality data.
- Rarely do stakeholders give input into the development of data systems and dissemination methods, nor are they trained to use the system.
- Most sites rely on informal internal evaluations of the effectiveness of their data efforts.

Data collection and reporting are both a policy consideration and an important technological consideration. Locations across the nation that are doing a good job of collecting data are doing so with the use of state-of-the-art data-warehousing tools and thorough use of the Internet and web-based tools.

The states and school districts that identify weaknesses in their information systems frequently cite outdated technology as a major impediment to overcome for future success. Technology is critical for improving annual and semiannual transmission of data from districts to the state, maintaining the integrity and quality of data, and reporting of data in a timely and user-friendly manner.

A consistent finding across jurisdictions was the political impact of data collection and reporting. While most might agree that data collection should be separate from political considerations, this study reveals that important political bargaining is used to facilitate major changes across several locations.

Local survey respondents want the following:

- Information to be made available via both the Internet and person to person
- School report cards and reports on teacher quality produced by the SEO

Focus group findings enriched the discussion about how to bring together information on education from all parts of the District of Columbia. What emerges is a picture of the clear divide in the city between those who have access to information technology and are confident in its use and those without access and participation.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The community-at-large must collectively help to build the political will to improve the state of education information in the District of Columbia. This research presentation is intended as a catalyst because it results from a much-needed cross-alliance of stakeholder groups: the grassroots, midlevel service providers, community and university researchers, and policy makers alike.

A. Recommendations for Action by the SEO, Mayor and District Council, DCPS, Charter Schools, Private Schools, and the Washington Teachers' Union

1. Expand the Communication of Information

- Translate all DCPS and charter school data into forms that are accessible to non-English-speaking families and families with low literacy.
- Ensure that appropriate information is distributed equally to all schools and is readily accessible to teachers, parents, and students.
- Provide information on schools and educational opportunities through a wider range of media:
  - Use person-to-person opportunities such as school meetings, workshops for parents, parent centers, conferences, and phone calls to communicate information to parents. Promote more time for individual and small group discussions among school administrators, teachers, parents, and students.
  - Make greater use of newsletters and audiovisual media to communicate with students.
  - Create and distribute program and school directories in catalog form.
  - Provide teachers' e-mail addresses to parents.
  - Reach out to Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs) and other neighborhood organizations to distribute written and oral information to parents, and also to encourage teachers, school administrators, and city officials to share information with their representatives at their meetings.
  - Produce television or radio shows on choosing a variety of careers, training and college options, financial aid, and scholarships. Include important statistics. Have shows repeated in predictable time slots. Increase the use of public service announcements.

- Make school report cards available through various modes of communication.
- The teachers' union, assuming broad outreach to new and long-term teachers in all wards of the city, should play a key role in dispersing important data and information, both person-to-person and electronically.

B. Recommendations for Action by the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and the Chartering Authorities

The following recommendations should be enacted by the DCPS Administration, the D.C. Board of Education, and the Chartering Authorities:

1. Improve Data Gathering and Analysis

- Increase the capacity of DCPS and the Chartering Authorities to gather and produce more and better-quality information.
- Make explicit the rules of confidentiality and of access to confidential information and train staff to follow them. Protect privacy and produce usable data with trustworthy and transparent information systems.
- Revise customer satisfaction surveys from DCPS and the Chartering Authorities to tap more complex issues, such as the content and flow of information.
- Involve the community (select community based organizations, Washington Teachers' Union, etc.) to advise DCPS, Chartering Authorities, and other schools in the city, on what information is gathered and how it is analyzed.

2. Expand Use of the DCPS Website

- Greatly enrich the DCPS website, with more types of information about schools, and make the website more user-friendly and enticing for students, parents, and teachers.
- Provide information on a range of policies that affect teachers, parents, and students (e.g., special education rules and regulations and time frames for carrying them out).
- Expand information on educational opportunities (e.g., special programs, science and technology labs) for students within public schools, including opportunities elsewhere in the city (e.g., access to museums, internships) and for career planning (e.g., SAT prep, job and college fairs).
- Expand information about special programs offered by each school—especially high schools.
- Provide information for and about teachers, such as certification, teaching experience, and pay scale.

C. Recommendations for Action by the State Education Office (SEO) of the District of Columbia

- Create a Districtwide oversight group:
  - To give citizen and frequent-user input into system development and information dissemination and to guide expansion of the use of education information.
  - To gather and ensure consistency of education information.
  - To ensure protection of privacy and representation from traditional public, charter, and parochial and other private schools, as well as of individuals.
- In conjunction with DCPS, conduct a thorough needs assessment of the DCPS information infrastructure.
- Conduct a mapping of the state of education information not only within DCPS but also among charter schools, parochial schools, and other private schools.
- Conduct a deeper technical analysis of single-record information systems, which track individuals over time.
- Conduct a deeper technical analysis in order to decide which data-warehousing and software relates best to data needs in the District of Columbia.
- Conduct a deeper technical analysis in order to decide which software can best ensure that data are of high quality. Develop rules to systematically check data quality.
- Develop a system to take complaints, arbitrate disputes about data, evaluate data and systems periodically, and feed information about issues that arise back to the SEO so that it can make changes to the information system.
- Develop a long-range plan for an all-encompassing education data management and dissemination system.
- Make information available in formats that can be used by independent, nongovernmental groups to analyze and report on—even to criticize—and to keep transparent the information necessary for education change to happen.
- Develop a comprehensive website that makes data available in a variety of software formats.
- Determine objections of decentralized school units (such as specific public, charter, and parochial and other private schools) to a centralized data system and find a mutually agreeable solution for a comprehensive coordinated information flow.
- With the community's help, build the demand side for education information, encouraging more stakeholdeers to ask for and use data.

D. Recommendations for Action by the District of Columbia Mayor and Council

- Mandate that important types of data are made explicit and uniform among all schools in the District (e.g., school safety data and dropout statistics).
- Mandate that basic information be gathered in a common format and delivered to a central database, including public, charter, and parochial and other private schools. This information format should be compatible with the information formats of other city agencies to provide cross-agency support for students and families.
- Mandate that all schools use data-reporting software that provides uniform data and give them the necessary technical support.

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